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Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Uganda

Summary

The present report has been prepared in accordance with the provisions of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005). It is presented to the Council and its Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict as the first country report on Uganda from the monitoring and reporting mechanism referred to in paragraph 3 of that resolution.

The report, which covers the period from 8 June 2006 to 15 March 2007, specifies incidents of grave children's rights violations and abuses, indicative of their nature and trends in Uganda.

The report explicitly identifies parties to the conflict that were referred to in my 2006 report on children and armed conflict (S/2006/826 and Corr.1): the Uganda People's Defence Forces and its allied local defence units, as well as the Lord's Resistance Army.

The report highlights the work of the Uganda Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting in establishing relevant mechanisms to carry out its functions in accordance with Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) and the preliminary steps taken by the Government of Uganda to address violations against children, in particular the drafting of an action plan to eliminate the use and recruitment of children in armed conflict. The limited number of cases reported in the report is attributable to the fact that the Task Force was only recently in a position to rely on a network of monitors specifically trained to report on six grave violations and abuses of children's rights in implementation of resolution 1612 (2005).

The report also contains a series of recommendations with a view to securing strengthened action for the protection of war-affected children in Uganda.

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I. Introduction

1. The present report, prepared in accordance with Security Council resolution 1612 (2005), covers the period from 8 June 2006, when the first meeting of the Uganda Task Force on Monitoring and Reporting was launched by my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, to 15 March 2007. The Task Force is chaired jointly by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and includes Save the Children in Uganda and the Uganda Human Rights Commission.

2. Introductory training sessions of relevant partners, mainly local networks of protection monitors, camp managers and other non-governmental and community-based organizations, were held from October 2006 to January 2007. A full-time focal point within the Task Force was appointed in December 2006, to strengthen the existing monitoring and reporting programmes of OHCHR and UNICEF in the districts. The incidents of violations and abuses cited for the reporting period serve only as an illustration of the nature and trend of continuing challenges regarding the respect, protection and fulfilment of children's rights in armed conflict in Uganda.

3. The report explicitly identifies parties to the conflict that were referred to in my 2006 report on children and armed conflict (S/2006/826 and Corr.1): the Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) and its allied local defence units, as well as the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). This is not intended to exclude future reporting on child rights violations and abuses committed potentially by other armed forces and groups operating in the framework of the armed conflict in Uganda. The report identifies parties to the conflict responsible for grave violations and abuses committed against children covered under the monitoring and reporting mechanism as endorsed by the Security Council in its resolution 1612 (2005). The Task Force has recently started to monitor the Karamoja and Teso region. Karamoja, a region in the north-eastern part of Uganda, is characterized by recurrent problems of proliferation of illegal firearms, cattle rustling, looting, ambushes and other acts of criminality, political marginalization and a general lack of central government services, including inadequate social, medical and judicial institutions. Owing to the continuing insecurity and proliferation of weapons in the region, and in follow-up to several earlier disarmament initiatives, the Government of Uganda and UPDF launched a renewed disarmament campaign in May 2006. The ongoing disarmament exercise is implemented by using a method referred to as "cordon and search", whereby the army surrounds huts and searches for firearms. Since its inception, allegations of human rights violations, affecting women and children, linked to the ongoing forced disarmament process have been continually reported and denounced by local non-governmental organizations and the international community. Teso region has a population of displaced persons caused both by LRA activities and armed Karamojong cattle raids. At the time of writing the Task Force had not launched the training on monitoring called for in Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) in those regions, therefore it was decided to limit the geographical scope of the present report to Acholi and Lango regions, The Task Force will be in a position to provide more details on the human rights situation in Teso and Karamoja in time for my next report.

4. The report also highlights the work of the Task Force in establishing mechanisms to carry out its functions in accordance with Security Council resolution 1612 (2005), as well as the preliminary steps taken by the Government of

Uganda to address violations against children in the context of the armed conflict, in particular the formulation of an action plan in conjunction with the Task Force and the wider United Nations country team.

II. Political, military and social developments in Uganda

5. My 2006 report on children and armed conflict listed Uganda among the countries where parties to armed conflict recruited or used children and were responsible for other grave violations, and referred specifically to UPDF, the local defence units and one armed group, LRA.

6. As my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict concluded at the end of her mission to Uganda in June 2006, although the Government of Uganda does not have an official policy to recruit children, children are present among its armed forces, especially within the local defence units. Field-based research indicates that UPDF recruits young boys to serve within its auxiliary forces, in particular the local defence units, which are also known as "home guards". The latter, often with the consent or even the urging of their families, willingly join such forces, attracted by the prospect of receiving wages and providing security for their homesteads or camps. Age verification is rarely carried out during enrolment or training processes. In addition, after having been trained, many of these children do not return to their home areas, and are said to be fighting alongside UPDF.

7. Although the 2005 Uganda People's Defence Forces Act prohibits the recruitment of children under the age of 18 years, the lack of effective monitoring at the local level leads to children continuing to join some elements of the armed forces. Factors contributing to the problem include extreme poverty within internally displaced persons camps and corruption of members of local council executive committees who provide birth certificates to teenagers on demand, for a fee. In that respect, it must be noted that the 2005 Act provides that every person who wishes to be recruited into the defence forces must first get the recommendation of his or her village local council. UPDF must strictly adhere to and monitor recruitment procedures as well as investigate any case of alleged violation of the relevant provisions of the 2005 Act, especially as they relate to requirements for recruitment into the armed forces.

8. While the local defence units are not specifically regulated by law, they are de facto under the responsibility of the regular armed forces of Uganda and receive their training and arms from UPDF. They operate under the command and control structure of UPDF and when they have contravened its orders or the law, they are tried before a UPDF court martial. In that respect, it is significant that there are no signs of the release of the 1,128 children reported to have been mobilized into local defence units in late 2004 in Kitgum, Pader and parts of Teso region.

9. In addition, cases continue to be reported of rape and other forms of sexual violence against girls by Government military personnel, in particular in internally displaced persons camp settings and return areas.

10. The latest figures from 2005 suggest that as many as 25,000 children may have been abducted since the onset of the conflict in northern Uganda in Kitgum and Gulu districts, later leading to the phenomenon of night commuting to avoid abduction and other human rights abuses. According to the UNICEF databank

figures on night commuters, 44,000 children and adults were moving nightly during the peak of hostilities in 2004, to take refuge in urban centres, avoiding the risk of being abducted or subjected to other human rights abuses. Children have been used as combatants, porters, informants and other service providers, including sexual slaves. However, the total number of abductions and of night commuters has significantly reduced since its peak in 2004.

11. In that respect, it is important to recall that, on 8 July 2005, Pre-Trial Chamber II of the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for LRA leader Joseph Kony, his deputy Vincent Otti, and LRA commanders Raska Lukwiya, Okot Odiambo and Dominic Ongwen. Public redacted versions of the arrest warrants were released on 13 October 2005. All five leaders are charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity, including rape, murder, sexual enslavement and the forced enlisting of children.

12. It must be noted that LRA is not currently active within the territory of Uganda, hence the inability of the Task Force to monitor, verify and report allegations of abuses committed against children by the LRA either in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or southern Sudan, where it is reported the LRA armed group is currently present. In agreement with the United Nations country team in the Sudan, any violations committed by LRA in Sudanese territory will be reflected in the report to the Security Council on the Sudan and will not feature in the present report.

Situation of the armed conflict affecting the northern part of Uganda and the peace process

13. The peace talks between the Government of Uganda and LRA officially opened on 14 July 2006 in Juba, southern Sudan, under the mediation of the Vice-President of Southern Sudan, Riek Machar. The Parties signed a formal Cessation of Hostilities Agreement on 26 August 2006, which was extended until 28 February 2007.

14. It was initially expected that the prospects of the signing of a peace agreement would mean a potentially significant increase in the number of child soldiers released by LRA. However, despite repeated pleas by various stakeholders, including the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict, LRA has not released any children, women or non-combatants from its ranks. During the initial months since the signature of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, some 300,000 internally displaced persons, of a total of 1.7 million, have begun the process of leaving the camps for areas closer to their places of origin in northern Uganda. No violent incidents attributable to LRA activities were reported in northern Uganda. Unfortunately, the parties were unable to capitalize on this achievement. They failed after three months of negotiations to agree on the draft of the agreement covering agenda item II, "The root causes of the conflict and comprehensive solutions". The atmosphere was also rendered difficult as a result of mutual suspicion and mistrust between the parties, as well as between one party and the Mediation Team. The LRA leadership refused to return to the negotiating table in Juba unless certain demands were met.

15. On 1 December 2006, I appointed Joaquim Alvaro Chissano, the former President of Mozambique, as my Special Envoy for the LRA-affected areas to

facilitate the resumption of the stalled peace talks. After a series of consultations in the region, representatives of the Government of Uganda and the LRA delegation indicated to my Special Envoy on 11 March 2007 that they remained bound by the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement that expired on 28 February 2007. They reiterated their commitment to peace and to finding a peaceful way out of the current crisis. On 14 April, they agreed to extend the Agreement until 30 June 2007 and to resume peace talks in Juba on 26 April 2007, under the mediation of the Government of Southern Sudan.

Visit of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict

16. In June 2006, the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict visited Uganda at the invitation of the Government. The Special Representative reported on the personal testimonies of survivors of the horrific acts of violence perpetrated on the people of northern Uganda by LRA, as well as on testimonies from women and girls who had been subject to sexual violence in the camps for internally displaced persons.

17. Regarding the presence of children among Government forces, the Special Representative confirmed that, although children were indeed slipping through established procedures into UPDF and its auxiliary forces, the local defence units, there was no explicit policy of recruitment of children on the part of the Government of Uganda. To address the issue, the Government has committed itself to strengthening the implementation of the existing legal and policy frameworks on the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, agreeing on an action plan: (a) to sensitize various stakeholders on the national laws, international conventions and protocols against recruitment and use of children in armed forces; (b) to monitor the implementation of the various national laws, international conventions and protocols against the recruitment and use of children in armed forces; and (c) to remove children if and when they are found in the armed forces.

18. In addition, the Government of Uganda reiterated its commitment to take appropriate disciplinary action against those military officers who knowingly recruit and use children, and agreed to strengthen existing independent monitoring procedures for joint access to military installations by designated institutions. The Government also committed itself to reviewing existing laws to cover the crime by civilian officials of aiding and abetting in the recruitment of children into armed forces.

III. Grave violations and abuses of children's rights

Killings and maiming of children

Uganda People's Defence Forces/local defence units

19. Six incidents of violent assault (not resulting in death) involving UPDF soldiers have been reported in northern Uganda since December 2006, including one case of serious injury sustained from a landmine. In an additional incident a woman was raped and stabbed to death by a soldier in Amuru District. The woman's

18-month-old child, who also sustained injuries, was found abandoned next to the body.

Lord's Resistance Army

20. No information was available on killings or maiming of children by LRA during the period under review.

Abductions of children

Uganda People's Defence Forces/local defence units

21. No cases were reported of abduction of children by UPDF or the local defence units during the period under review.

Lord's Resistance Army

22. There is a long history of unresolved abductions during the protracted conflict in northern Uganda, with hundreds of documented cases of women and children abducted by LRA and used in various capacities, from combatants to forced labourers to sexual slaves. The total number of abductions in January 2005 was estimated to be approximately 1,500, significantly reducing to 222 over the first six months of 2006.

23. Notably, since September 2006, there have been no confirmed reports on the abduction of children in Uganda by LRA. It must, however, be noted that the majority of active LRA elements have withdrawn from the Ugandan territory, mainly into southern Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

24. It is estimated that up to 2,000 women and children may still be held by LRA within its ranks, although it is not possible to provide accurate statistics or to verify allegations. The continued presence of children in LRA ranks is confirmed through the testimonies of children escaping LRA or being captured by UPDF and handed over to child protection agencies in northern Uganda. For example, from June 2006 to February 2007, 53 children, including 12 girls, were received at a reception care centre in Lira. From September 2006 to February 2007, 28 children, including two girls, were received at reception care centres in Gulu and Pader. While the majority had recently escaped from LRA captivity, a number of cases were referred by relatives in an attempt to provide the children with psychological support. One formerly abducted [redacted] interviewed at a reception centre in Lira, who had escaped with two small children from Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in late 2006, reported the continued presence of abducted girls with LRA forces who were too afraid to flee.

25. The Task Force has verified two reports where children released from LRA have been detained by UPDF at military facilities. One of the children was taken to an area of UPDF operation in southern Sudan and asked to provide intelligence information, in particular with a view to locating arms caches. Both of the children were later released and properly registered as formerly abducted following direct interventions by members of the Task Force.

Attacks on schools and hospitals

26. Concern continues to be expressed about the presence of anti-personnel landmines and other unexploded ordnance in a number of public facilities, such as schools. Mines and unexploded ordnance are reported to have been planted by both parties to the conflict.

Uganda People's Defence Forces/local defence units

27. Government military forces have engaged in the continued occupation of schools in abandoned communities. Munitions have been stored at these locations, rendering them unsafe for children.

28. In Achol Pii sub-county, Pader District, UPDF has set up a barracks a few metres from a primary school. At the time of writing, Orina Primary School in Adilang sub-county, Pader District, was occupied by UPDF. Adilang is a new settlement site for people choosing to leave internally displaced persons camps. In Ayoma, Kitgum District, the reopening of the school has been delayed due to UPDF occupation of the school facilities. UPDF forces were occupying Olung Primary School in Lukole, Kitgum District, until relocation in January 2007, and Paiula Health Centre Level II in Pajule sub-county, Pader District, until late 2006, when they relocated to their current detachment north of the Pajule internally displaced persons camp. In Lira District, Abongoweri primary school in Okwang sub-county, and Amwonyele primary school in Orum sub-county were still occupied by UPDF forces as of February 2007.

Lord's Resistance Army

29. During 2002 and 2003, Oloo primary school in Aloi sub-county, Ogoro and Amunga primary school in Ogwang sub-county and Aterayom and Bar keo and Ogwete primary schools in Olilim sub-county were occupied by LRA forces. Although these forces have not occupied the schools for more than three years, unexploded ordnance and landmines have been reported and the children have not been allowed to return. The Uganda mine action team is currently working to recover landmines and other explosives from the areas, and children will resume school once the areas have been declared safe.

30. Although there have been no reported attacks on schools by LRA since 2003, there are still fears among the population of LRA attacks in the event of renewed fighting.

31. Similarly, there have been no reports of LRA attacking or looting health facilities in 2006, save for an incident on 22 August 2006, when LRA forces in Pader District ambushed an ambulance belonging to Kalongo hospital. The ambulance itself was burned and medicines and other equipment were stolen.

Sexual violence perpetrated against children

32. The difficult humanitarian situation increases the risk of sexual violence, including sexual exploitation, for children in northern Uganda. Owing to sociocultural factors as well as the limited mechanisms available to file a complaint or to receive proper medical attention, only a small percentage of cases are actually

reported. It is therefore difficult to make an accurate assessment of the incidence of and trends in sexual violence and the extent of the involvement of armed forces.

Uganda People's Defence Forces/local defence units

33. Women and girls contacted through focus group discussions in six camps in Gulu and Amuru Districts in 2007 reported sexual harassment, sexual intimidation and sexual abuse by UPDF soldiers.

34. Additional information reported to members of the Task Force in Kitgum and Pader Districts confirms that communities have been intimidated and encouraged not to report cases of sexual violence committed by UPDF soldiers. There have been no reports of threats or intimidation of non-governmental or community-based organizations providing support to survivors of sexual violence.

35. Local authorities and child protection committees at the sub-county level in nine districts in northern Uganda have reported 26 cases to the Task Force of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by UPDF soldiers between June 2006 and March 2007. Transactional sex reportedly increases at the end of each month when soldiers receive their salaries and soldiers themselves in one location have corroborated this information. Details of these incidents are below.

36. Ten cases of girls aged between 14 and 16 years living with UPDF soldiers have been reported to the Task Force in Pader District. It is not clear whether these girls are the "wives" of these soldiers. Two cases of 14-year-old girls living within UPDF barracks in Amuru District have also been brought to the attention of the Task Force.

37. Since December 2006, 11 cases of rape perpetrated against girls by UPDF or local defence unit elements were reported to the Task Force. In December 2006, three girls were taken by soldiers from their homes in a camp in Pader District. One was raped and the other two were sexually assaulted. In the same camp, focus group discussions with community members revealed that boys sold information about vulnerable girls to soldiers. In February 2007, four girls were abducted by a UPDF soldier in Gulu District, resulting in the rape of two of the girls, aged 12 and 14. During the same month, another 14-year-old girl was raped and strangled to death by a local defence unit soldier in Amuru District. Although these cases have been reported to the police, so far no arrests have been made either because of the difficulties in identifying the perpetrator or because the suspect has disappeared.

Lord's Resistance Army

38. No information on sexual violence perpetrated against children by LRA in Uganda was available during the period under review.

Recruitment of children and their use as child soldiers in northern Uganda

Uganda People's Defence Forces/local defence units

39. From September 2006 to March 2007, 8 out of the 58 people who returned from LRA were retained by UPDF for extended periods and some of them were

engaged in UPDF operational activities. Five of the eight persons were below 18 years of age.

40. During the reporting period, very few children returned from LRA, as stated above. However, once in UPDF custody, the military used at least one child for intelligence gathering and kept others in custody longer than the UPDF principles and policy of a maximum of 48 hours allows. From November 2006 to January 2007, six youths, including three children under the age of 18 years, who had been abducted by LRA, returned and presented themselves to local authorities. They were all handed over to UPDF, four to Pajimo barracks in Kitgum District and two to Achol-Pii Division headquarters in Pader. The Task Force visited the latter on 13 February and was informed by the 5th Division UPDF Intelligence Administrator that the youth in question were assisting UPDF in uncovering weapon caches. During a visit to Pajimo barracks, the Task Force was informed by a counter-intelligence officer that all of the youths had been moved to Achol-Pii. During the same visit, it was confirmed from a separate military source that the children were engaged in intelligence operations in northern Uganda. Despite repeated requests by the Task Force, access to the group in Achol-Pii was only granted when they were released to the reception centre in the Pader Town Council on 18 February 2007.

41. During the same period, two children presented themselves in Pader to the local authorities and were handed over to UPDF. They were transferred to Lira Hospital to receive medical treatment; both had been injured during UPDF-LRA confrontations. Although one child was released to a reception centre, the other has been kept at the child protection unit in the barracks since 16 February 2007 and has transported on a daily basis for medical treatment. The Task Force continues to advocate for his release to the reception centre.

42. To illustrate the commitment of the Government not to recruit children into its army ranks, it must be noted that on 25 October 2006, UPDF carried out a recruitment and registration exercise in Gulu District, during which 150 youths were disqualified owing to the lack of proper documentation proving their age.

Lord's Resistance Army

43. No information on recruitment and use of children by LRA during the period under review was available.

44. Requests for the release of children from LRA made to the leadership during the reporting period were not met. In particular, religious leaders and organizations who had contact with LRA as they moved through northern Uganda to the assembly points in southern Sudan, requested, pursuant to article 4 (a) of the Cessation of Hostilities Agreement, that children, women and any sick person be released to the reception centres or health centres. No one has been released to date.

Denial of humanitarian access to children

45. During the period under review, no cases of active denial of humanitarian access to children by either party to the conflict have been reported.

IV. Dialogue, action plans and monitoring and reporting to redress violations and abuses of children's rights

46. It is of concern that serious violations of children's rights are seldom prosecuted in Uganda, especially in the northern part of the country where few have access to justice. The general lack of access to civilian justice (due to a militarization of law and order functions as a result of the conflict) coupled with an absence of civilian police officers specifically trained to handle cases involving children (as victims or as suspects) and the relative ignorance of magistrates regarding domestic provisions related to child rights and welfare, make children very vulnerable with respect to obtaining legal remedies for violations and harm suffered.

General coordination on child rights and child protection issues

47. Since its establishment in June 2006, the Task Force has worked on the establishment of a mechanism to monitor violations of the rights of children in armed conflict with the objective of supporting concrete action for the protection of children in conflict-affected areas across the northern districts of Uganda and providing relevant information to the Security Council Working Group. The Task Force has focused on engaging the Government of Uganda in prevention strategies and in ensuring the involvement of partner non-governmental and community-based organizations in the establishment of the monitoring mechanism.

48. To further strengthen its capacity to comply with the provisions of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005), the United Nations country team commissioned a "state of knowledge study" in March 2007. Following examples from other countries working on issues relating to resolution 1612 (2005), the study will enable United Nations agencies and the Task Force to identify further regular data collection resources as well as to establish a firm baseline understanding of the situation as it pertains to the six categories of violations and abuses. The study will also examine the capacities of existing mechanisms and structures in Uganda to collect and analyse relevant information with a view to developing a strategic plan for the continuation of monitoring activities and liaison with the Government of Uganda on child protection issues.

49. A network of trained local monitors has been put in place to assist the Task Force. Initial training of local paralegals working in camps was carried out in Gulu in September 2006 with a view to building their capacity to report on relevant cases. With funding from the Coalition against the Use of Child Soldiers, a second training exercise was carried out in Gulu in October, co-facilitated by members of the Task Force. Further training funded by UNICEF was carried out by the members of the Task Force in Kitgum in December 2006 and in Pader and Lira in late January 2007. By early February, some 100 monitors from various local non-governmental organizations, including paralegals, had been capacitated to monitor child rights violations and abuses throughout the northern districts of Uganda. Follow-up training has been carried out in Gulu and further training is planned in 2007 to develop and strengthen the network of field and camp-based monitors.

50. In addition, the Task Force has relied on the child protection committees that have been established at both the camp and sub-county level in the northern districts

of Uganda. The committees involve community leaders, parents, teachers and local district officials and staff as well as children themselves, and are mandated to monitor children's rights and to address protection concerns, including on issues related to households headed by children, sexual exploitation, the return of formally abducted children and children vulnerable to recruitment. At the district level, a child protection working group, composed of non-governmental and community-based organizations, is led jointly by district authorities and UNICEF, ensuring that violations of children's rights do not go unreported or unaddressed. The work of the district working group feeds into the national Inter-Agency Standing Committee sub-cluster on child protection, which reports to the Committee's protection cluster at the national level (which in turn reports to the Humanitarian Coordinator).

51. Awareness-raising activities in relation to the six grave violations and abuses set out in Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) have been carried out throughout northern Uganda, notably through the monthly district human rights promotion and protection meetings, led by the Uganda Human Rights Commission and OHCHR, held within the framework of the national internally displaced persons policy of the Government of Uganda.

52. Similarly, awareness-raising activities have been carried out with the Inter-Agency Standing Committee protection clusters at the district level. The district protection clusters support the work of the Task Force by referring relevant cases brought to its attention, and participating in the analysis of trends and patterns insofar as they relate to the promotion and protection of children's rights.

53. A standardized reporting tool has been devised, which is now used by various protection agencies and organizations to collect information on allegations falling within Security Council resolution 1612 (2005). United Nations agencies members of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee protection cluster, i.e., OHCHR, UNICEF and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees act as entry points for all incident report forms. In the event of a case related to one of the six grave violations or abuses of children's rights, the form is referred to the Task Force for verification and appropriate follow-up.

54. I am also pleased to report that members of the civil-military cooperation centres in the northern districts of Uganda, funded by OHCHR, have also been trained to collect relevant information. The centres are coordinated by the Uganda Human Rights Commission and are composed of representatives from UPDF, the Uganda Police Force, civil society, the Uganda Human Rights Commission and national United Nations Volunteers, also funded by OHCHR. They are mandated to receive and investigate complaints regarding violations allegedly committed by military and police personnel, as well as to raise awareness of human rights norms and principles within these two institutions. The Task Force has come to an agreement with the civil-military cooperation centres that information relevant to Security Council 1612 (2005) will be forwarded to the Task Force.

Action plan of the Government of Uganda

55. An initial draft action plan, presented by the Task Force in June 2006, was rejected by the Government of Uganda on the grounds that the evidence surrounding the use of child soldiers in Uganda had not been fully established and verified. The Government subsequently took the initiative to draft its own version of an action

plan, which the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UPDF presented to the Task Force on 18 December 2006. On 2 February 2007, the Government transmitted it for consideration to the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

56. Referring to national and international relevant norms, the Action Plan aims at sensitizing various stakeholders on their respective responsibilities vis-à-vis child rights and tasks the Human Rights Department of UPDF to create awareness among the rank and file of the army on the promotion and preservation of human rights and to monitor human rights violations by and against the army. In addition, and in line with the Government's commitment to remove children if and when found in the armed forces, the Action Plan describes the efforts made by UPDF to undertake continuous screenings where its forces are operating, with a view to preventing the presence of children within its ranks, and to design stringent recruitment procedures.

57. In mid-March 2007, the Task Force shared its comments on the Action Plan with the Government and the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. In particular, it drew the attention of the Government to the fact that the Plan, though a laudable effort, did not follow the criteria for designing action plans at the national level set out by the Special Representative, especially with respect to the specific measures envisaged to prevent recruitment and re-recruitment of children and agreed time-bound benchmarks for measuring progress and compliance. The Task Force also regretted the absence of specific provisions regarding the involvement of the international community, where the latter may be of support to Government initiatives. It noted that the Action Plan contained only a list of broadly defined activities without a clear statement of objectives or background to the main issues surrounding violations of child rights. The focus on the UPDF Human Rights Department as the body within the army responsible for monitoring activities was also challenged in view of its inability to have shown any significant impact at field level in the two years of its existence and in the absence of details regarding specific activities aimed at child rights. The Task Force regretted that the Action Plan did not address the issue of accountability within the armed forces or give details of the processes through which violations would be addressed, investigated and eventually punished, nor did it include measures that might support children removed from the armed forces, especially with respect to their reintegration into civilian life. Finally, the Action Plan did not contemplate addressing the root causes of underage recruitment, both from the point of view of the armed forces, but also of children and their families. In discussions between the UPDF and Task Force members, it was agreed that a meeting would be convened by the Uganda Human Rights Commission between the Task Force and UPDF to discuss the way forward.

Independent on-site monitoring of Uganda People's Defence Forces/local defence unit facilities

58. Following a meeting between members of the Task Force and UPDF political commissars in December 2006, UPDF agreed that the Task Force should undertake inspection and monitoring visits to its facilities, in particular during the recruitment processes and training of new recruits, with the principal purpose of age verification. This is a positive step towards the implementation of the commitments made by the Government of Uganda during the visit of my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict. In order to conduct independent on-site

monitoring visits regarding the presence of child soldiers in UPDF, as well as the local defence units under the command structures of UPDF, the Task Force has proposed terms of reference for unannounced and unhindered visits to all their facilities. They guarantee that the members of the Task Force carrying out such visits will be authorized to speak privately and confidentially with any individual soldiers suspected of being under the age of 18 during the visits and have full access to all documentary material relevant to the visit, in particular personnel records, including birth certificates, educational and other certificates bearing personal details, as well as any other official document issued for purposes of recruitment.

59. At the time of writing, the terms of reference are in discussion with UPDF. It is hoped that the first on-site monitoring visits will have been carried out by the time the Working Group considers the present report.

60. Complementing the monitoring visits, the Task Force commits itself to working jointly with UPDF and the local defence units to ensure immediate and appropriate follow-up to remove any persons under the age of 18 years found within the UPDF and local defence units structures, including through referral to appropriate child protection agencies and services. It is also foreseen that the necessary steps must be taken to ensure that persons suspected of having recruited or used child soldiers be held accountable in accordance with the law.

V. Follow-up and programmatic response to violations

61. Uganda has ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and has incorporated into the 2005 Uganda People's Defence Forces Act a provision prohibiting the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Humanitarian child protection programming is ongoing in the northern districts in conjunction with district partners and information on Security Council resolution 1612 (2005) will be used to guide these interventions.

62. Interim care centres, locally known as reception centres, have been established in the northern districts since 2003 and are receiving formerly abducted children, including those referred by Uganda People's Defence Forces child protection units. The same reception centres have been identified and are prepared to receive women and children from LRA in the event that they are released from captivity in southern Sudan or elsewhere.

VI. Recommendations

63. I call upon all parties to the conflict to comply without further delay with the resolutions of the Security Council on children and armed conflict by maintaining a dialogue with the Task Force for the preparation and implementation of a concrete and time-bound Action Plan, ideally by 31 July 2007, to halt the grave child rights violations and abuses for which they have been cited.

64. I am deeply concerned over the absence of any concrete signs regarding the release of children associated with various forces, especially local defence units and LRA, and urge the relevant authorities to take the appropriate measures for the immediate release of all children, women and non-combatants, and call for a

prioritization of a disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process for children.

65. I urge the leaders of LRA to take immediate steps to end child recruitment and the use of child soldiers and to release children associated with their forces and for United Nations entities and non-governmental organizations to implement effective, well-resourced and well-monitored programmes, to return them safely to their families and places of origin and provide services needed for their reintegration back into community settings. All armed forces and groups, as well as other actors such as the Task Force, United Nations entities, non-governmental organizations and government agencies should take appropriate steps to ensure that safeguards and gender-sensitive programmes are in place to guarantee the basic rights of girls associated with the armed forces and groups, particularly as regards their protection, release and reintegration into communities. In this regard, I call upon the international community to provide adequate long-term resources for the development of appropriate interventions.

66. I call upon UPDF to reach an agreement with the Task Force in order to immediately and effectively allow the conduction of independent on-site monitoring visits to military barracks, regarding the presence of child soldiers in UPDF, as well as the local defence units under the command structures of UPDF, within the framework of Security Council resolution 1612 (2005).

67. I am deeply concerned by reports of sexual violence against girls and women, particularly in internally displaced persons camp settings, and stress the urgent need for national authorities to prosecute and punish responsible parties and to develop effective prevention and response strategies for the protection and support of girls and women vulnerable to sexual violence, especially among displaced populations.

68. I call upon the international community and donors to provide all necessary support for the reinforcement of the monitoring and reporting partners of the Task Force, ensuring that adequate information is collected and communicated to appropriate actors and bodies on the impact of violations against children in this new phase of peacemaking in Uganda. I also call upon the donor community to ensure that sufficient resources are made available to support programmatic efforts for the release, return and reintegration of children associated with UPDF, the local defence units and LRA.

69. In the context of the peace negotiations, I call upon the negotiating parties and the mediation team to ensure that specific provisions for children are included at all steps of the negotiations, including the importance of holding accountable perpetrators of grave violations against children. Any transitional justice and reconciliation mechanisms that might be established should specifically make provisions for children victims of the conflict.

70. As a follow-up to the visit of my Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict to Uganda in 2006, I encourage a delegation of the Security Council Working Group on Children in Armed Conflict to undertake a mission to Uganda to provide continued support to the combined efforts of the Task Force and the Government of Uganda in protecting children in conflict affected areas.

71. I am concerned about reports of the occupation of schools in abandoned communities by Government military forces and the establishment of military barracks in proximity to schools. I call upon the Government military forces to

expeditiously vacate all school premises, to recover landmines and other explosives from school areas and to issue official declarations that identified school areas are safe for children to resume their education, relocating any military barracks in proximity to school areas to appropriate sites.